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ABSTRACT

Intended for college students and teachers of English literature, this paper examines the lives and works of three great medieval Anglo-Saxon priestly scholars whose Latin writings have preserved the Anglo-Saxon roots of the English language. The paper first describes the works of Aldhelm, born in 650 A.D., whose poetry was not in the Latin qualitative tradition but rather betrayed Aldhelm's origins with its many riddles and transference of alliteration and violent imagery from his native poetry into Latin. The paper explores the various literary devices from the English tradition that Aldhelm incorporated into both his writings and his sermons. Next, the paper describes the works of the Venerable Bede, who was born in 672, and in whose view of poetry imagery and poetic devices were worthless if they did not further Christian faith. Among Bede's works mentioned in the paper are an ecclesiastical history of the Angles, and an example of Northumbrian dialect and poetics. Finally, the paper discusses the works of Alcuin, who in 781 joined Charlemagne's effort to revive learning and civilized living in Western Europe. The paper observes that Alcuin emulated Bede's works in that his writings extolled virtue, knowledge, truth, and love of good as precious for their own sakes, whatever the religion of the one who values them, and he stated that learning should be used to light one's way to God. (HTH)

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Litera Scripta Manet--The Written Word Endures

by Hope Bussey Mckenzie
based in part upon the work of the
late Dr. John Godfrey

To the Teacher of Survey Courses in English Literature--College Level

The following paper may give the student a glimpse of how the Anglo-Saxon roots of our language were preserved by students and writers of Latin. This involved process is simplified and made human through the examination of the lives and works of three great medieval scholars--all native Anglo-Saxons: Aldhelm, Bede, and Alcuin. Student papers, modeled upon this one, could serve as reasearch papers dealing with any period of literary history.

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Hope Bussey McKenzie

Litera Scripta Manet
The Written Word Endures

Janus, looking at the same time forward and back, must have been the tutelary genius of three remarkable men of our Anglo-Saxon past--Aldhelm, Bede, and Alcuin. Together, in their respective generations, they reached back into their common cultural heritage and, through the medium current in their day--the Latin language, transmitted to scholars in generations to come what otherwise would surely have been lost. These three shared the experience of school, monastery, and church, yet each was thoroughly rooted in the racial and cultural soil of their native England. Although they had to some extent lost their old continental outlook brought

with the migration of the Germanic tribes, they were consciously forming a new orientation with a scope unimaginable to their forefathers. Nevertheless, the indelible stamp of their past is a clear underlay and overlay, showing through the new language in which they wrote and giving the present-day scholar of Anglo-Saxon and Old English literature not only fragments of prose and poetry in the original form--most often derived from oral tradition--but also Latin works which showed the unmistakable charateristics of the writers themselves.

Chronologically, as well as logically, Aldhelm appeared first in this triad, although harmonically speaking, he might be thought of as the major third in the first inversion of the chord. He was not the dominant fifth--the Venerable Bede--nor the superior home-tone--Alcuin; but it might be said that he was the base from which their pitch can be determined. He was born about 650, perhaps the son or nephew of the king of Wessex, and was educated first under the Irish scholar, Maeldub, but for the most part at Canterbury under the African, Abbot Hadrian, and Theodore, the Greek monk from Tarsus.[1] The influence of these three foreign masters may explain why Aldhelm's evidently successful vernacular poetry was not preserved while his Latin

verses, although not of very good quality, are still extant. Baugh characterizes them as "verse done in isosyllabic lines. Nearly all we have of his poetry is in hexameters, and belongs to the classical quantitative tradition."[2]

The poetry of Aldhelm was not however in the Latin qualitative tradition. He betrays his origin in his passion for riddles--"about 100 versified riddles done on the model of Symphosius,"[3] and in his transference of alliteration and violent imagery from his native poetry to his Latin works.[4] He was, as Legouis says, "first of all an artist with whom manner has precedence of matter."[5] His most ambitious poem, De Virginitate (2904 lines), is the verse-rendering of a prose treatise of the same name, addressed to nuns, and there is "a curious coquetry in his discourses to them. It is the praise of virginity which he indites in prose, the praises of virgins in hexameters."[6] His other poetry includes a number of Carmina Ecclesiastica (428 lines) and the above-mentioned riddles. It is interesting, but tantalizing, to note that William of Malmesbury quotes no less an authority than King Alfred's Handboc which states that Aldhelm had no equal in composing verse in his native tongue.[7] The Handboc no longer exists.

The attentive reader may be able to guess that Aldhelm

loved Latin for its intellectuality, but he loved the muscle-bound two-legged rhythms and barbaric imagery of his English tradition even more. At any rate, he incorporated the most cherished devices of the latter into his prose works, sometimes making them the excuse for the Latin language which he evidently wrote with pleasure in his own facility. As Legouis says, "His Latin is grammatically correct to a point which is rare at the end of the seventh century. . . ."[8] Moreover, his English "devices" are of the sort that Englishmen admired most, long before Aldhelm and long after, as evidenced by his influence upon later writers in the composing of both Latin and vernacular riddles.[9]

These devices included heavy use of alliteration, even in Latin, the clutter of periphrasis, the introduction of bold Saxon imagery, and his "habit of materializing the abstract."

> . . . golden necklace of the virtues, the white jewels of merit, purple flowers of modesty, swanlike whiteness of old age, 'the opening of the gates of dumb silence,' 'the shining lamps of chastity in which the oil of modesty burns,'

> 'the unclean sink of impurity in which the vessels of the soul are miserably engulfed,' 'the bastion of the Catholic faith shaken by the war-machines of secular arguments and overthrown by the battering rams of atrocious ingenuity.'"[10]

Among the specific prose works of which the devices are the "warp and woof" are the above-mentioned De Virginitate, Epistola ad Acircian, a letter to King Ealdfrith of Northumbria, and a few other letters. In the letter to King Ealdfrith, Aldhelm details his principles of metrics as he had no doubt learned them in the cathedral school at Canterbury, illustrated by his own riddles and many other examples drawn from the Greeks as well as the postclassical writings, including Scripture, with which he was of course thoroughly well acquainted.[11]

As for his preaching, here too he incorporated the old and the familiar into his sermons. There is the story of Aldhelm on the bridge at Malmesbury, chanting profane verse, interspersed with biblical allusions to engage the attention of his congregation.[12]

So the first of the three transmitters of the past filtered his heritage through the language of the Church and made that heritage available to those who came after. But

in the process, he remained himself, true to his national character. As Legouis sums him up, "He was a seventh-century stylist, an artist who was at once a barbarian and a refined scholar."[13]

The contrast between Aldhelm and Bede strikes through their differing intentions to their differing results. The exuberance of Aldhelm is replaced in Bede by a sober, meticulous examination of facts and the "diligent documentary research" which resulted in the general description applied to him now: the first modern historian.

The Venerable Bede was born in 672 and in 679 entered the monastic school at Jarrow. He spent the rest of his life there, going through the usual progression from deacon (at nineteen) to priest (at thirty). Until his death in 735, Bede read, wrote, taught, and spoke Latin, and in his plain simple recounting of the events of a people, there is, as Baugh says, a graceful dignity to please even the Latin scholar of today. It may or may not be significant that in the half-generation between Adlhelm and Bede, the Christian influence on the English had worked to dim even further the old habits of thought and custom that had been carried to England with the migration of the tribes.[14] So the dominant fifth sounds a note of quiet, mater-of-fact integrity.

In his view of poetry, Bede saw imagery and poetic

devices as worthless if they did not further Christian faith. Unlike Aldhelm, who occasionally burst into native poetry for its own sake, Bede turned every shred of his wide Latin writings into a matrix in which he embedded Christian doctrine. And when he signed a book, as in some Latin writings, he seems to have had utility more than beauty in mind.[15]

Bede's chief work is the Ecclesiastical History of the Angles. In it he preserved the culture, the events, and the mind-set of an era which was already fading in Bede's own time. His "diligent documentary research" gave an authenticity to his work which even the inclusion of incredible cures, miracles, and strange occurrences fails to destroy. The clear, simple style, the historian's impersonal approach to the subjects, and as Legouis says, the intelligence implicit in the History bring its purpose into sharp focus: to depict the conversion of a people and the triumph of the Roman over the Irish church.[16]

The lives of abbots, a book of martyrs, two lives of St. Cuthbert, and "a universal chronology of the Christian era based on serious astronomical studies" are other important works composed by Bede directly in his role as theologian. But he also wrote a treatise on metre and a natural history. His poem, De die judicii, translated into English as Be domes dæge, was quoted with great respect by scholars in succeeding

centuries and was analyzed time and again for its theological insights as well as for its metrical value. In this way Bede passed on a tradition in both English and Latin, preserving the character of the English mind in its own language and further refining the use of classical Latin rhetoric to express the one thing to which he was dedicated--the spread of christianity. As Huppe says, "In Bede's view . . . poetry that did not force the mind to an intense appreciation of such underlying [Christian] truth was without function."[17]

The final example--in this paper--of Bede's writings, The Death Song, reveals the reasons for Bede's importance as one of the "Clerks" of our English heritage: not only is it an example of Northumbrian dialect and poetics, but it is a clear and simple expression of a universal idea.

> Attention to the structure of the Death Song fixes in the mind of the reader the contrast between becoming and being, between the goal, which is after death, and the way to the goal, which is before death. The structure of the poem, despite its simplicity, has the virture of compelling thoughtful consideration of the Christian doctrine that man's life is a pilgrimage from

> becoming to being. His wisdom is to understand that the good and evil he does before death will determine his being in eternity. He has no time for any other wisdom.[18]

This developing pattern of the single-minded use of language to spread the influence of Christian civilization found an international exponent in Alcuin. Whether he at first had any image of himself as arbiter of manners, morals, and learning, we will never know. But there is a great corpus of his writing preserved in a number of libraries that provides proof of his value as such an arbiter. Further, he was the first of our triad to add a new note--the political--that extends his influence still wider in the shaky world of the eighth and ninth centuries.

More is known about Alcuin's life than about those of either Aldhelm or Bede, thanks in part to the work of an anonymous author, writing under the orders of Alcuin's pupil, Sigulf. Alcuin was born in Northumbria, possibly of a noble family, and spent his early years in the cathedral community of York. It seems interesting and perhaps prophetic to note that he never went beyond the rank of deacon, attained in his nineteenth year. But this fact in itself is significant in that he became a traveler, accompanying

the bishop and later archbishop AElberht on journeys to the continent and later, on his own, as an envoy to various kingdoms and to Rome.[19] Thus he learned early the political realities of his age from the perspective of a Christian commitment.

In 781 Alcuin met Charlemagne at Parma--not their first meeting--and accepted Charlemagne's offer to join him in the effort to revive learning and civilized living in Western Europe.[20] From that time, the patient, meticulous Alcuin became magister to a generation of semi-barbarous kings, bishops, and public figures. He wrote a stream of letters to "members of the royal household, to the kings of Mercia and Northumbria, to Frankish and British nobles and government officials"--even to Charlemagne himself--" . . . to develop in the leaders among the laity of a barbarian age a sense of responsibility and a personal culture fit for the commanding positions which these men held."[21]

So Alcuin moves out into his generation "in the best tradition of Bede"; though he goes much farther, the base is the same:

> The study of letters has as its purpose to increase in ability to understand the underlying

> meaning of Scripture. . . .[And as Charlemagne says in a letter supporting Alcuin,] "And well do we all know that however dangerous are the errors of the letter the errors of meaning are much more dangerous. Wherefore we urge you not only not to neglect the study of the letter, but also in the most humble intention of pleasing God hastily to learn this, so that the more easily and directly you may be able to penetrate to the mystery of divine Scriptures. Moreover, since in the sacred pages are found schemes, figures, tropes, and the rest like to these, there can be no doubt that anyone reading will understand the underlying meaning (spiritualiter) the more readily the more fully he has first been instructed in the mastery of the letter.[22]

"The mastery of letters" was one of the chief aims of Alcuin's Grammatica, which detailed the seven grades of the liberal arts and which continued in his Rhetoric. In this latter work, Alcuin, in an imaginary dialogue between himself and Charlemagne, talks of "Virtue, Knowledge, truth, love of good" as precious for their own sakes, whatever the religion of the one who values them. Charlemagne asks what

difference there is between the pagan philosophers and Christians. Alcuin says simply, "Faith and baptism." When Charlemagne asks what the purpose of all this virtuous learning is, Alcuin answers that the aim is to use that learning to light one's way to God,[23] a perfect Bedonian answer, now addressed to an audience far beyond the confines of church and monastery.

So the home-tone sounds, true and clear. What we do not know of that now far-away past becomes relatively unimportant in the light of what has come down to us. Most poignant of all is the way it came--on the written flood of thought and feeling, gathering strength and flexibility as it poured from the pens of these three ready-writers. This is a fragile web of parchment and ink to carry such a weight. But thanks to Aldhelm, Bede, and Alcuin--and all those who followed in their tradition--the past lives as the written word endures.

NOTES

[1] Emile Legouis and L. Cazamian, A History of English Literature: The Middle Ages and the Renascence (1650-1660) 2 vols., trans. Helen Douglas Irvine (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1926) 1: 5.

[2] Albert Croll Baugh, ed., A Literary History of England, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1967) 13.

[3] Legouis and Cazamian 6.

[4] Baugh 14.

[5] Legouis and Cazamian 6.

[6] Baugh 14.

[7] Michael Lapidge and Michael Herren, trans. Aldhelm the Prose Works (Totowa, New Jersey: 1979) 19.

[8] Baugh 14.

[9] Baugh 14.

[10] Legouis and Cazamian 6.

[11] Lapidge and Herren 12-13.

[12] Lapidge and Herren 18-19.

[13] Legouis and Cazamian 5.

[14] Baugh 15-16.

[15] Montague R. James, "The Manuscripts of Bede," Bede: His Life, Times, and Writings, ed. Alexander Hamilton Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969) 236.

[16] Legouis and Cazamian 6.

[17] Bernard F. Huppé, Doctrine and Poetry: Augustine's Influence on Old English Poetry (New York: State University Press, 1959) 124.

[18] Huppé 79.

[19] Peter Godman, ed., Alcuin: The Bishops, Kings, and Saints of York, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982) xxxvi.

[20] Godman xxxvi-xxxvii.

[21] Luitpold Wallach, Alcuin and Charlemagne: Studies in Carolingian History and Literature, Cornell Studies in Classical Philology, vol XXXII (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, rptd. 1968) 229.

[22] Huppé 46-47.

[23] Huppé 47-48.

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